

**Australian Non-custodial Unwed Fathers: What is their
level of parental involvement?**

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Abstract

Despite close to a third of Australian births now being ex-nuptial, Australian research on the phenomenon of unmarried non-custodial fathering is virtually non-existent. While overseas data indicates that such fathers are less involved with their children than other non-custodial fathers, these conclusions are not directly translatable to Australian social circumstances. As such, a social policy response to rising rates of ex-nuptial child bearing is limited by the lack of any baseline data. This analysis, using a combination of data from the ABS (1997) Family Characteristics Survey and the 1990 AIFS Child Support Evaluation finds there is good reason to conclude that Australian unwed non-custodial fathers are also significantly less parentally involved with their children than previously married non-custodial fathers. However, the research also concludes that many questions remain unanswered and specific, targeted research is required.

Australian Non-custodial Unwed Fathers: What is their level of parental involvement?

Modern western fatherhood is a paradox of competing images. While the importance of fathers to children and the unique value of the father's role is increasingly recognised, the number of fathers who no longer live with their children is also escalating. Social researcher Frank Furstenberg (1995) labelled these contradictory trends the 'good dads - bad dads' paradox. The focus of this paper is the second image of fatherhood: Men who don't live with their children and more specifically the non-custodial fathers of the rising numbers of Australian ex-nuptial children.

The Rising Number of Ex Nuptial Births

Over the last 30 years Australia has seen a dramatic rise in the number of one-parent families. The majority of these families are formed through divorce or marital separation but marriage and child bearing have also increasingly separated. While the proportion is still modest by US standards, Australian ex-nuptial births rose from 6 percent in 1963 to nearly 29 percent in 1998 (ABS 1999). The trend is continuing upward.

Table 1: Australian Ex-nuptial Births 1954 - 1997

Year	Percentage of ex-nuptial births (a)	Year	Percentage of ex-nuptial births (a)	Year	Percentage of ex-nuptial births (a)
1954	4.0	1981	10.1	1994	24.9
1961	4.0	1986	13.2	1995	26.6
1966	5.1	1989	16.8	1996	27.4
1971	7.4	1990	20.2	1997	28.1
1976	9.3	1991	21.9	1998	28.7

(a) Proportion of total live births.

Source: Adapted from ABS Australian Demographic Statistics 1997 (3101.0) & ABS Births 1998 3301.0

The proportion of unwed teenage mothers has declined in recent years, but as Table 2 indicates, the total number of women bearing ex-nuptial children has risen sharply. Over half of the 70,600 Australian ex-nuptial births in 1998 were to women in the 20 - 30 year old age group and only 15 percent were to teenage mothers (ABS 1998).

Table 2: Australian Ex-Nuptial Births by Age of Mother and Year of Birth

Year	Age of Mother						N ('000)
	<20	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40+	
1971	39.2%	33.4%	14.5%	7.5%	3.8%	1.6%	25.4
1998	15.1%	30.7%	26.6%	16.9%	8.7%	2.0%	70.6

Source: Adapted from de Vaus and Wolcott 1997 and ABS Births 1998 3301.0

It is estimated that 50 percent of Australian ex-nuptial births are to women in de facto relationships (McDonald 1995). However, research also indicates that cohabiting relationships with children are more likely to end than marriages with children (Kaplan, Lancaster et al. 1998; Glezer 1988 cited in Burns 1991). The fact that only 7 percent of children in couple families live with de facto parents whereas around 30 percent of sole parents are never married mothers would seem

to corroborate this assumption (ABS 1997; FACS 1998).

Overseas, the difficulties faced by unmarried mothers and the disadvantages faced by ex-nuptial children have long been the subject of research and social policy initiatives. US research has consistently found that children from single mother families are more likely to be poor, have problems in school and to leave school early (Seltzer 1989). However, the prime focus of this research and consequent social policy has been the unmarried mother. The fathers of ex-nuptial children have been an ignored, almost invisible group in a social policy or research sense. This is noteworthy because while the causes of unwed pregnancies are complex, research indicates that the antecedents of such pregnancies have as much to do with the attitudes and situations of men as with the circumstances of women (Lerman and Ooms 1993). Consequently policy makers in the US and UK have in recent years begun to re-examine unwed childbearing in a manner that incorporates fathers. This focus change has been driven by the realisation that the economic and social involvement of unmarried fathers can mitigate some of the negative effects of unmarried parenting on their children.

Yet, US and UK studies also indicate that rates of parental involvement by unmarried fathers are significantly lower than that of other non-residential fathers (Seltzer 1991). Additionally, this research finds that unwed paternity is not randomly distributed with unwed fathers more likely to: live in areas of higher unemployment, come from families who have experienced financial hardship, be more delinquent than their non-father peers, have a low educational background, have poor labour market prospects and a limited sense of personal responsibility (Ku, Sonenstein et al. 1993; Dearden, Hale et al. 1994; Pirog-Good 1988; Nesmith, Kerlman et al. 1997; Marsiglio 1995).

The Australian Situation

Despite the interest overseas, Australian empirical knowledge on unmarried fathers and their level of parental involvement is virtually non-existent. Yet, this group is sizeable and growing. ABS (1992) figures show 18.5 percent of men with non-residential children have never been married and a further 9.4 percent of currently married non-residential fathers have not previously been divorced. Extrapolation of these figures indicates that at least 25 percent of men who have non-residential children have ex-nuptial children. Further, while Australia is socially similar in many respects to other western countries, we cannot assume that research findings from overseas are translatable or relevant to Australia. The following factors need to be taken into account:

- Australia has significantly different paternity acknowledgment patterns. Nearly 85 percent of Australian ex-nuptial fathers acknowledged paternity in 1997. Although rates were lower for indigenous (64 percent) and teenage ex-nuptial (76 percent) births, the overall rate is notably higher than that in the USA (average of 50 percent across states) or the UK (67 percent) (de Vaus and Wolcott 1997; Kiernan 1997; McLanahan & Sandfleur).
- Australian social policies in areas such as child support and sole parent income support are substantially different to those in other western countries

and contribute to a singularly Australian set of social conditions and circumstances.

- The focus of much overseas research is poor black urban populations, a group whose social circumstances and history do not have a direct Australian equivalent.
- US and UK studies concentrate on teenage fathers. Given Australian data indicating most ex-nuptial births are to women aged over 20 years, this focus appears unsuited in the Australian situation (de Vaus and Wolcott 1997).

Therefore, while we know Australian unwed fathers are different in paternity acknowledgment rates we don't know if they also differ in their level of parental involvement.

Researching Unwed Non-Custodial Fathers in Australia

Most overseas research on unwed fathering uses longitudinal national survey data such as the National Survey of Families and Households (US) and the National Child Development Study (UK). As yet, there is no comparable Australian equivalent of these resources and this lack is a major obstacle to gaining an Australian perspective on ex-nuptial fathering. While the ABS included for the first time questions related to non-custodial parenting in their 1997 survey of Australian families, these questions were limited in scope and the dataset is not available to researchers for higher-level analysis.

However, although specific data on Australian ex-nuptial fathers is not currently available, it is possible to gain an impression of the parental involvement of unwed non-custodial fathers through a secondary analysis of existing survey data. In order to provide such an indication, this research uses a combination of two Australian resources to examine a number of different dimensions of paternal involvement. The first, commissioned data from the ABS Family Characteristics Survey (1997) uses data collected from custodial mothers to analyse the level of formal and in-kind child support received and the frequency of contact between children and their non-custodial fathers. Secondly, data from the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) 1990 evaluation of the Child Support Scheme (CSS) is used to explore non-custodial fathers' attitudes to child support and their level of influence in their child's life.

The AIFS dataset is limited by its age (1990) and is not fully representative of Australian non-custodial fathers. All respondents were registered with the Child Support Agency (CSA) and thus likely to be over representative of regular child support payers. As the authors of the original evaluation note, poor or non-payers are less likely to participate in surveys on child maintenance (Harrison, Snider et al. 1991). The fathers who do not acknowledge paternity are also unrepresented. Despite these shortcomings, the AIFS dataset is valuable in that the information comes from non-custodial fathers themselves.

Thus, this research analyses data from two separate and very different data resources. They are different in age of data and representativeness of the sample.

They also differ in the source of data, with one collecting data from custodial mothers and the other from non-custodial fathers. Given these factors, no claims are made that the findings provide a definitive picture of the parental involvement of unwed fathers. Rather, given the lack of a more reliable data source, the purpose of the analysis is to utilise the data that does exist to provide an indication of the current Australian situation.

Findings

ABS Survey Data

The ABS survey (1997) collected information from custodial mothers on the level of formal and informal child support they received and the frequency of contact between the non-custodial parent and their child. In this analysis, 'ever married' mothers are those custodial mothers who have ever been in a registered marriage and 'never married' are those custodial mothers who have not. The survey collected data on a per child basis from over 538000 custodial mothers of whom 71 percent were ever married and 29 percent were never married. For this analysis, tables were commissioned from the ABS to examine child support and contact data by the marital status of the custodial mother.

Formal Child Support

A comparison of the rates of receipt of child support by ever and never married custodial mothers shows clear differences. As indicated in Table 3, nearly half (49 percent) of the ever married mothers reported receiving child support payments compared with only 38 percent of unwed mothers. This pattern was repeated in rates of receipt of in-kind child support. In-kind support refers to things such as payment of school fees, health insurance, mortgage repayments and clothing. Around 34 percent of ever-married mothers received in-kind child support compared with 28 percent of never married custodial mothers.

Table 3: Whether Family Received Child Support by Marital Status of Custodial Mother

Marital Status	Receives Child Support %	Receives No Child Support %	Total (‘000)
Formal Child Support			
Ever Married	49	51	382.5
Never Married	38	62	155.6
In kind Child Support			
Ever Married	34	66	382.5
Never Married	28	72	155.6

Source: Commission Unpublished Data from ABS Family Characteristics Survey 1997

Contact with Children

A comparison of the frequency of contact between children and their non-custodial fathers also showed a distinct pattern. As indicated in table 4, while the proportion of children who saw their non-custodial fathers at least once a month was similar for both groups, children of never married mothers were less likely to ever see their fathers. Around 37 percent of these children saw their father less

than once a year or never compared with 29 percent of the children of ever-married custodial mothers.

The ABS survey also asked custodial mothers about other forms of contact between the non-custodial fathers and their child. As shown in table 4, while 69 percent of the children of ever married mothers had phone or letter contact with their father, only 49 percent of the children of never married custodial mothers had such contact.

Table 4: Child Contact with Non-Custodial Father by Marital Status of Custodial Mother

	Ever Married %	Never Married %	Total ('000)
Frequency of Visits			
Daily	4	6	42.3
Once a week	20	25	212.0
Once a fortnight	17	11	148.6
Once a month	8	6	72.6
Once 3 months	9	5	82.6
Once 6 months	5	4	50.4
Once a year	6	4	51.2
Major shared care	2	2	25.4
Less than once a year or never	29	37	291.1
Contact by Phone/Letter			
Has contact	69	49	527.0
Does not have contact	31	51	286.8

Source: Commission Unpublished Data from ABS Family Characteristics Survey 1997

AIFS Survey Data

The AIFS (1990) data sample contained responses from 1334 non-custodial parents of whom 89 percent (1184) had been married to the other parent and 11 percent (150) had not. The 22 non-custodial mothers were excluded from the analysis. Among the unwed fathers, 65 percent had previously lived in a de facto relationship with the mother of their child and 35 percent had never lived with their child's mother. For the AIFS data analysis, 'unwed father' is defined as a man who has fathered a child to a woman with whom he has not been in a registered marriage. The term 'married fathers' refers to separated or divorced non-custodial fathers who were previously in a registered marriage with the mother of their child/children.

Personal Characteristics

While the AIFS data collected only limited personal details, a comparison shows that unwed fathers were younger than married fathers with mean ages of 34 and 39 respectively and significantly more likely to be unemployed. Slightly over 20 percent of unwed fathers were not in employment compared with 12 percent of the married non-custodial fathers ($\chi^2 = 7.42$, $df=2$, $p=.02$). The groups were equally likely to live close to the custodial parents' home and interestingly both groups were as likely as each other to be currently married.

Attitudes to Paying Child Support

The AIFS survey assessed non-custodial fathers' attitudes to paying child support. In a multiple response question, fathers were asked to nominate whether they agreed with a set of 17 statements relating to child support and the Child Support Scheme (CSS). For analysis purposes, I have grouped these statements into 5 major themes. As table 5 indicates, unwed and married fathers' were largely similar across the first four themes, although unwed fathers were significantly less likely to agree that the CSS was unnecessary because they were paying before.

However, the items relating to the fifth theme, 'obligation to pay child support' all show strong statistically significant differences between the groups. Unwed fathers were significantly more likely (55 percent) to agree that they shouldn't have to pay because they had no say on how the money was spent than other fathers (39 percent); significantly more likely (35 percent) to agree that they did not want to pay maintenance than married fathers (19 percent); to feel that they had no obligation to support their children (23 percent) compared married fathers (6 percent) and to agree that because they did not see their children they should not have to pay (44 percent) than married fathers (26 percent).

Further, although all unwed fathers were more likely to agree to all four items, those unwed fathers who had never lived with the mother of their child had even higher agreement levels across three of the items. Forty two percent of those who never lived together agreed that they had no obligation to support their children compared with 13 percent of previously de facto fathers ($Chisq = 16.60$, $df=1$, $p=.000$). Forty five percent of never lived together fathers agreed they did not want to pay maintenance compared to 30 percent of previously de facto fathers ($Chisq = 3.51$, $df=1$, $p=.05$) and 62 percent of never lived together fathers compared with 34 percent of previously de facto fathers agreed they should not have to pay because they did not see their children ($Chisq = 11.09$, $df=1$, $p=.001$).

These findings indicate that unwed fathers, while holding similar attitudes to child support as married fathers across most issues, do not feel as strong a sense of personal obligation towards providing ongoing economic support for their children. Moreover, within the unwed non-custodial fathers group those who have never lived with the mother of their child are even less likely to feel such economic obligation.

Table 5: Non-custodial Fathers' Concerns about Paying Child Support

	Unwed % Agree	Married % Agree	Total N
CSS Benefits			
Scheme makes paying easier	24	22	296
It helps avoid conflict over money	32	32	423
Automatic payment makes it easier to budget	31	34	335
CSS Problems			
Do not have enough income to pay	39	33	453
My new family makes a difference	24	24	323
Creates/increases problems over custody/access	23	25	332
Privacy Issues			
Interferes in private matters between parents	27	29	390
Do not want workplace involved	43	46	610
Scheme not necessary as paying regularly before	40**	52	678
The Scheme takes away my choice	49	49	659
Control of Money			
Money is not spent sensibly	39	39	521
Other parent does not need the money	37	37	488
Money is not spent on the children	36	36	485
Obligation to Pay			
Should not pay since have no say in how money is spent	55*	39	548
Do not want to pay maintenance	35*	19	275
Should not pay since I do not see the children	44*	26	376
Feel no obligation to support the children	23*	6	109

*Denotes statistically significant at $p < .0001$

** Denotes statistically significant at $p < .005$

Multiple Response Item ---Listed below are some comments made by some parents who pay child maintenance through the Child Support Agency. Would you please indicate those with which you agree.'

Influence in Child's Life

The AIFS survey asked respondents how frequently they discussed a set of nine child related issues with the custodial parent. Responses to these items were rated to produce scores of between 1 and 4, with 4 representing 'discuss often', 3 for 'discuss sometimes', 2 for 'discuss rarely' and 1 for 'discuss never'.

To facilitate analysis these nine individual measures were scaled to produce a single measure of the non-custodial father's influence in the child's life. The individual items were significantly correlated (.9 or higher) and as indicated in Table 6, when combined, these measures explain 72 percent of respondents' level of influence. With an Alpha score of .95, the scale is very reliable.

A comparison of the overall means of the unwed fathers and the married fathers found a significance difference between the two groups ($t = 2.77$, $df = 1303$, $p = .006$). This difference is reflected across the items with unwed fathers significantly less likely to ever discuss the child with the custodial mother on any of the topic items. This finding suggests that unwed fathers have significantly less ongoing influence in their child's life than married non-custodial fathers.

Table 6: Principal Components Analysis: Influence in Child's Life

	Factor Loading	Communality
Discuss children's school or medical problems	.89	.80
Discuss child's progress	.90	.82
Discuss child rearing problems	.90	.81
Discuss major decisions related to the child	.88	.78
Discuss child's personal problems	.92	.84
Discuss child related finances	.74	.54
Discuss daily decisions related to the child	.76	.58
Discuss how the child is coping with separation	.76	.58
Plan special events with other parent.	.84	.71
Eigenvalue		6.46
% of variance		71.8
Alpha		.95

Discussion

Parental Involvement of Unwed Non-Custodial Fathers

Parental involvement, as it applies to non-residential parents, is of course not a single faceted concept, but one that has a number of related but different dimensions. While there is as yet little consensus among social scientists of what constitutes non-residential parental involvement, the model developed by Judith Seltzer (1991) provides a basic measure. Seltzer's model uses three rights and responsibilities to define the role. These are: economic support, measured by formal and informal child support paid; social involvement measured by the frequency of contact between the parent and child and authority, defined as the influence the non-custodial parent has on the child's life.

Under these criteria, the findings of this analysis indicate that despite high rates of paternity acknowledgement, the level of parental involvement of Australian unwed non-custodial fathers' is significantly less than that of previously married non-custodial fathers. Importantly this reduced level of involvement is valid across all three of the Seltzer's dimensions of non-custodial parenting, economic support, social involvement and authority. Ex-nuptial children receive less formal and in kind child support from their non-custodial fathers than nuptial children and are less likely to retain any form of ongoing contact with their fathers. The fathers of ex-nuptial children are also significantly less likely to remain influential in their children's lives.

These results are especially concerning given the increasing recognition of the benefits of paternal participation in separated family situations. Studies consistently find that fathers' payment of child support improves not only children's standard of living but also their health, educational attainments and general sense of well being (Amato 1998). Amato's (1998) meta-analysis of studies relating to non-residential fathering also found that other dimensions of parenting impact on children's wellbeing. In particular the level of emotional bonding

between the father and child and use by the father of an authoritative parenting style, are positively related to schooling success and negatively related to problem behaviour. These dimensions are similar to this study's measure of parental influence. Amato concludes the current data suggests non-custodial fathers have the potential to contribute to their children's well being in a manner comparable to that of residential fathers.

However, the evidence is not uncontested. Any paternal involvement is not necessarily a positive outcome for children. The father/child relationship cannot be viewed in isolation of other family dynamics, with child behaviour problems positively correlated with the level of inter-parental conflict (Amato 1993). Other research suggests the impact of paternal involvement on children's well being is mediated by the mother's attitude to paternal participation and her ability to collaborate with the father, the father's skill in establishing a warm relationship with his offspring and the child's needs (Furstenberg 1988). Mother's 'gatekeeping', of access to the child has also been raised as an issue, with many non-residential fathers feeling disenfranchised by the access process (Marsiglio and Day 1998).

Why are Unwed Fathers Less involved?

However, while the analysis shows that Australian unwed fathers are likely to have lower levels of parental involvement, the specific findings cannot discern the reasons for this lower rating. While Australian data is scarce, US studies have found that factors such as geographical mobility, repartnering of either parent, inability to establish workable arrangements with the mother, lack of access, inadequate financial resources and efforts to reduce psychological pain are cited by non-custodial fathers as impediments to paternal involvement (Nord and Zill 1996). Perhaps these factors are even more of an impediment to unwed non-custodial fathers than to other fathers.

It is impossible, without targeted large-scale research, to conclude how influential these factors are to the paternal involvement of Australian ex-nuptial fathers. However, the finding that the attitudes of unwed non-custodial fathers reflect a significantly lower sense of obligation to providing ongoing financial support is of concern. This reduced sense of paternal obligation to paying child support is likely to also be influential across the other dimensions of parental involvement and be reflected in reduced paternal interest in maintaining ongoing contact or influence in his child's life.

Social Policy Implications

Overseas, unwed father's level of parental involvement is the subject of increasing research and social policy initiatives. Fuelled by welfare reform debates as well as concern for fatherless children, the US has introduced a number of fatherhood responsibility programs designed to give men the social and economic skills to be effective fathers regardless of their marital status or relationship to the mother of their child (Committee on Human Resources 1998). While no such social policy debate has yet occurred in Australia government funding to project such as Dad's Unlimited and "New Beginnings", indicate Australian social policy interest in the area of non-custodial fatherhood. Based on the findings from this analysis the focus should be extended to include unwed non-custodial fathers.

Because being an unmarried and non-residential father does not necessarily also have to mean being an absent father. Although this research has focussed on the lower level of parental involvement of unwed fathers, it should also be recognised that a substantial proportion of unwed fathers are paying child support, seeing their children regularly and being actively involved in their children's lives. The reasons some fathers remain involved with their ex-nuptial children, despite the barriers and difficulties and others do not are poorly understood. While the concept of 'commitment to the child' has some validity, it does not explain why or how that commitment exists for some fathers but not for others. Marsiglio (1995) finds that many father's commitment to their children is contingent on their relationship with their mother. He advocates research into the processes that see men's romantic partner and father role identities entangled, arguing for a need to strengthen father's interest in their children irrespective of their relationship with the child's mother. From a social policy perspective, the reasons Australian unwed fathers are less parentally involved are central to policy development.

Conclusion

This analysis does not claim to provide a definitive or exhaustive picture of Australian unwed non-custodial fathering. Rather it seeks to provide an indication of the Australian situation as a prelude and impetus for more specifically targeted research.

The current paucity of Australian data on unwed fathers places substantial limitations on any social policy analysis of the issue. While this research provides an indication of the level of parental involvement of unwed fathers, other questions remain wholly unanswered. For example, what are the social, cultural, personal and economic characteristics of Australian unwed fathers? Is unwed fathering class located?

More importantly, in light of findings of the benefits of ongoing non-custodial paternal involvement in their children's lives, what factors impact on unwed non-custodial fathers' level of parental involvement? From the fathers' perspective and experience, what factors act as impediments or facilitators? In particular, what factors enhance both fathers' desire to remain positively involved in their children's lives and their actual capacity to contribute meaningfully as parents? With up to a third of Australian babies in some states now being born to unmarried parents, the topic is increasingly important.

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